Center for Immigration Studies

Backgrounder

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Mexico's Forgotten Southern Border:

Does Mexico practice at home what it preaches abroad?

By George W. Grayson

Mexican chief executive Vicente Fox, Foreign Secretary Jorge Castañeda, and presidential official Juan Hernández[1] have relentlessly implored Washington to afford better treatment and more opportunities to their countrymen. They have continually championed the issuance of additional visas for Mexicans to enter the United States, the institution of a guestworker program that would allow 250,000 or more Mexicans to gain employment north of the Rio Grande, and the provision of amnesty to the four million-plus Mexicans who reside illegally in the United States.[2] Indeed, several months before his December 2000 inauguration, Fox even argued for the eventual elimination of all restrictions on the movement of labor throughout North America.[3]

The Fox administration justifies its proposals on several grounds. They claim that Mexicans contribute to the U.S. economy by performing tasks supposedly shunned by Americans; Mexicans fill service jobs that are increasingly important to America's aging population; and, moreover, Mexicans will stop heading northward in 15 to 20 years when income levels rise and birth rates fall at home. In an attempt to improve conditions at the frontier, Fox has appointed former Baja California Governor Ernesto Ruffo Appel as border czar.[4] Above all, Fox, Castañeda, and Hernández emphasize human-rights in advancing their case for visas, guestworkers, and amnesty.

"We think that the broad immigration and labor agenda includes humane, civil, and adequate treatment for Mexicans: Mexicans here, going there; Mexicans as they cross the border; Mexicans when they start work and Mexicans who have already been in the United States for a long time," stated the foreign secretary.[5]

"I think that we have the moral authority in Mexico to insist that our people be treated *right* in the United States because we're changing in Mexico," averred Hernández.[6]

Is Mexico's advocacy of human rights real or rhetorical? Does the Fox government practice at home what it preaches abroad? One way to shed light on these questions is to explore Mexican policy with respect to Central Americans and other foreigners who unlawfully enter the country by crossing its zigzagged, mountainous, and jungle-infested 750-mile southern border with Guatemala and Belize.

This *Backgrounder* focuses on the National Migration Institute (INM), a dependency of the Ministry of Governance (also called Ministry of the Interior), and will

- identify abuses suffered by these illegal aliens;
- describe the reforms advanced by the current administration to address such ills;
- evaluate the relative success or failure of these changes; and
- present the key differences between the political environments at the Mexico-Guatemala-Belize and U.S.-Mexico frontiers.

Upon taking office, Fox named as INM commissioner Felipe de Jesús Preciado Coronado, 58, an affluent former businessman and lawyer who represented the state of Jalisco in the Chamber of Deputies from 1997 to 2000. As one foreign official said off the record, "Preciado made his money before entering government service and has no reason to enrich himself at INM."

Although the INM plays the lead role in immigration matters, it must work with more than a dozen other entities. These include the Government Ministry's undersecretariat for population, migration, and religious affairs; the Federal Attorney General (PGJ); the Federal Preventive Police (PFP); the Federal Judicial Police (PJF); the Mexican Social

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Security Institute (IMSS); the Presidential Office for Mexicans Living Abroad; and the ministries of Foreign Affairs (SRE), Labor (STyPS), Defense (SEDENA), Navy (SEMAR), and Treasury (SHCP). Also involved are a plethora of state and local social, labor, and law-enforcement agencies from the border states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, and Quintana Roo.

Abuses Suffered by Illegal Aliens at Mexico's Southern Border

Aliens, their embassies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international agencies, and Mexico's migrant-protection Beta Groups find that most abuses suffered by immigrants entering Mexico take place along its 600-mile border with Guatemala, with far fewer crimes committed on the frontier between Quintana Roo and Belize. That the army, which is more professional than most Mexican police forces, makes most of the arrests in Quintana Roo (where it is deployed to combat drug trafficking) may explain the lower incidence of wrongdoing in this state. Still, the region is awash in newcomers. For example, tens of thousands of illegal aliens perform construction work in the Tulum-Cancun "Maya Rivera" in Quintana Roo.[7] A study conducted in the Tenosique area of Chiapas found that three groups — criminals (47.5 percent), the local Public Security police (15.2 percent), and migration agents (15.2 percent) — accounted for most of the mistreatment of immigrants arriving in Mexico from Central America,[8] mainly along the new El Naranjo-El Ceibo-Tenosique highway. Further south in Chiapas — in the Tapachula, Puerto Madero, Ciudad Hidalgo, and Soconusco region — charges have frequently been leveled against plantation, or *finca*, owners for exploiting Guatemalan guestworkers, known as *jornaleros* or *braceros*, who work on their vast ranches.

The 100 or more criminal bands who prey on migrants run the gamut from petty thugs to small-scale smugglers (*coyotes*) to mafia-style squads to vicious street gangs. Even minor smuggling operations depend on a network of contacts that reach from the immigrants' home countries to American cities and towns, the promised land for most Central Americans and other foreigners who seek access to Mexico. It is estimated that individual coyotes, who charge $5,000 or more to guide one person 1,500 miles from Central America to the United States, can earn as much as $100,000 per year — an amount almost as large as that paid by single Mideasterners or Asians to reach the United States.[9] Meanwhile, professional criminal organizations — some of them headquartered in China, Korea, or the Philippines — can amass Croesus-class fortunes. Experts assert that the smuggling of humans is the most lucrative illegal activity in Mexico after narcotrafficking and commerce in stolen automobiles.[10]

The most notorious street gangs, often compared to the Crips and the Bloods of Los Angeles, are the Mara Salvatruchas, composed chiefly of former members of the Salvadoran army who have been deported from Los Angeles and other American cities. These tattooed hoodlums are especially adept at assaulting and robbing newcomers who hide in freight and tanker cars on trains that run from Tapachula through Oaxaca to Veracruz. The Mara Salvatruchas, who prize themselves as "migrant hunters," lie in wait for *indocumentados* when they jump off the slow-moving trains as they approach checkpoints. These bloodthirsty desperados also carry out car thefts and kidnappings, according to an immigrant-aid commit-

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tee headed by Bishop Felipe Arizmendi Ezquivel.[11]

Rather than engage in crude violence, unscrupulous officials typically exact bribes or *mordidas*. The payments may be a few dollars to allow a single person to transit the border or thousands of dollars to permit the passage of drugs, weapons, stolen automobiles, prostitutes, exotic animals, or archeological artifacts. Individuals and professional smugglers often endure shakedowns from both Mexican and Guatemalan officials before encountering private-sector bandits. The presence in El Carmen, Guatemala — just across the bridge from Talisman, Mexico, and a stone's throw from a Guatemalan immigration post — of a large, open lot packed with vehicles bearing California, Texas, and Arizona license tags highlights the impunity with which malefactors carry out their trade. Equally visible from the bridge joining Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico, and Tecún Umán, Guatemala, are the ubiquitous *balsas*, boards perched on truck tires that serve as precarious ferries for migrants and locals willing to pay a few pesos to cross the narrow, slow-moving Suchiate river. The largest number of complaints of wrongdoing in Guatemala are lodged against that country's National Civil Police (PNC), believed to be even more corrupt than Mexican authorities.[12]

Chiapan *finca* owners are frequently in the news, notably in the Tapachula and Guatemala City press, for their Simon Legree-like care of workers. The wealthy growers prefer Guatemalans over Mexicans to work on their plantations, where they raise mangos, bananas, coffee, and dozens of other crops in the fertile, steamy ambiance of southern Chiapas. Echoing U.S. employers' claims about Americans, these *finqueros* insist that Mexicans will not do the hard work of planting, cultivating, and picking. The ranchers have two options when hiring Guatemalan *jornaleros*. They may take advantage of a program operated jointly by the Mexican and Guatemalan labor ministries[13] or they can contract workers directly from makeshift employment offices in Tecún Umán, a rapidly-growing town called "little Tijuana" because of its ubiquitous prostitution and unbridled lawlessness.[14] The *finca* owners accomplish the overwhelming number of their 150,000 annual hires through private channels. A typical contract will specify the employment of 10 to 20 "temporary migrant workers" to harvest coffee or mangos for 30 days at $3.85 (35 pesos) per day.[15]

This approach allows them to pay rates at or below the $4.21 (38.30 pesos) official minimum wage. Although the daily compensation may sometimes be slightly higher, the amounts specified on the three contracts in the author's possession vary between $3.52 (32 pesos) and $3.85 (35 pesos) — with ranchers seldom if ever paying the workers' social security, year-end bonuses (*aguinaldos*), and other benefits. Even worse, some *finca* owners deduct from the paltry wages the cost of the two rudimentary daily meals and rustic housing furnished to most workers. The horrendous poverty and unemployment in Guatemala, especially in the departments of San Marcos, Huehuetenango, and Retalhuleu that lie cheek by jowl with Chiapas, ensures an abundance of men ready to accept these deplorable conditions.

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Guatemalan Vice Consul Erick Rodolfo Herrera Mata has urged Mexican authorities to investigate other abuses — specifically, charges that some of his countrymen were hired to work on the nonexistent "El Chaparral" ranch. Instead, they were trucked to banana plantations where, despite dawn-to-dusk labor, they were never paid the promised $3.96 (36 pesos) per day. Not only did they fail to receive compensation for three months, but the growers allegedly stopped feeding some *braceros*.[16] Bribes, intimidation, and political pressure ensure that Labor Ministry and Social Security inspectors steer clear of these farms, lest they "make waves," in the words of one former high-level Mexican policy maker who asked to remain anonymous.

Should an intrepid *jornalero* dare to report abuses to a state labor tribunal, Central American diplomats relate that he must (a) take time from work to file his grievance, (b) return approximately a week later to find out the court's response to his claim, and (c) personally deliver any tribunal-issued summons to the rancher, who may be surrounded by armed bodyguards. A *finca* owner must receive at least three summonses before the court will require him to appear, and — with delays, continuances, and red tape — it is almost certain that the *jornalero* will either have withdrawn his petition under duress, completed his contract, or been sent packing before the hearing date.

Reforms Attempted by the Fox Administration

Upon taking office, Fox realized the hypocrisy of demanding a crackdown on human rights abuses in the

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When in doubt about an individual's citizenship, Mexican officers leave it up to their counterparts in the alleged country of origin to make the determination and to take custody of the detainee.

United States, when undocumented workers were egregiously victimized in Mexico. As a result, his administration announced several reforms.

First, in June 2001, the government unveiled Plan Sur, or the "Southern Plan," designed to promote cooperation among the INM, the PFP, the PGR, and other agencies to curb the rampant organized crime and corruption arising from illicit traffic in migrants and merchandise at the Mexico-Guatemala border. In 2000, more than 120 Central Americans died at or near the frontier, according to human-rights organizations.[17] "A major part of the plan is to [provide dignity to the] migrants but also combat corruption and impunity," stated Government Undersecretary Javier Moctezuma Barragán.[18] Preciado announced that $11 million (100 million pesos) would be allocated to improve migration checkpoints and provide Beta Groups with more personnel and equipment. Apparently, this $11 million figure does not include the $9.9 million (90 million pesos) that INM allocates for deportations — 20 million pesos on buses and 70 million pesos on air fares.[19]

Washington encouraged Mexico's implementation of Plan Sur, particularly if Fox wanted to advance his immigration agenda in the United States. In early 2001, U.S. diplomats emphasized that most Americans regard all Spanish-speaking aliens as Mexicans. Hence, it behooved the INM to stem the influx of Central Americans who unlawfully enter Mexico as a back door to the United States. The 9/11 disaster made the Southern Plan even more important to North American security. The porosity of the Mexican-Guatemalan-Belize frontier renders it a virtual third American border in terms of U.S. vulnerability.

Second, as part of the Southern Plan, INM launched the "Orderly and Secure Repatriation" program for illegals from the three major sending countries. Ad hoc expulsions in the past failed to reduce the flow of migrants. "It took longer for our buses to turn around at the border than it did for undocumented migrants to reenter Mexico somewhere else," Preciado noted.[20] Now individuals apprehended anywhere in Mexico who claim to be Guatemalan, Honduran, or Salvadoran are dispatched to the INM's Tapachula center. If necessary, they spend the night in the Centro Belén, a hostel operated by Father Florencio María Rigoni of the Scalabrini order of missionaries. From Tapachula, they are bused to the frontier of their home country and handed over to local immigration authorities. Pursuant to a joint accord, Guatemalan authorities have agreed to transport their nationals to their home villages. Approximately 10 buses, each loaded with 38 Central Americans and two guards, leave Tapachula seven days a week. Some aliens from other Latin American countries try to pass themselves off as Guatemalans. They lie about their nationality in hopes of being dropped off in a country contiguous to Mexico, thus making it easier for them to recommence their northbound odyssey. When in doubt about an individual's citizenship, Mexican officers leave it up to their counterparts in the alleged country of origin to make the determination and to take custody of the detainee. Such discretion provides another opportunity for government agents to elicit bribes.

Mexican authorities hold most unlawful aliens from other countries at a detention facility in the Iztapalapa district of Mexico City before they are deported by air or boat.[21] In mid-2001, the center, designed to accommodate 250 detainees, held 409 illegal migrants representing 39 nationalities — from Albanians to Yemenis.[22] An expansion of this structure should alleviate crowding. In any case, Central American consular officers in Mexico City applaud the INM's readiness to permit them to visit detainees from their countries. Whenever possible, the INM seeks reimbursement for the plane ticket from the affected alien, his family, or country. In most cases, the Mexican government foots the bill, although the United States has underwritten a major share of the expense of repatriations to Central America. Sending Central Americans home from the United States costs $1,700 per person compared with an average expense of $22 when deportations are accomplished from Mexico. In an attempt to discourage entries, Mexico City and Washington have cooperated on producing and airing television commercials. One particularly compelling ad emphasizes that one migrant a day dies trying to enter Mexico.

Third, Fox and Preciado have added personnel to the Beta Groups, which were created in 1996 to safeguard the person and property of Mexicans crossing the U.S.-Mexico frontier.. This unarmed force provides food, lodging, protection, and legal representation to aliens, regardless of their status. Of the eight Beta Group offices in the country, only two are in the south: one in Tapachula, the other further north in Comitán, Chiapas. The INM chief promised that the Beta's presence in the south would expand from the 47

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agents working from Tapachula and Comitán areas to more than 130 officers situated along the five main road, river, and rail immigration routes that wind through the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, and Veracruz. Emphasis would be placed on the smuggler-ridden Isthmus of Tehuantepec, approximately 200 miles from the southern border through which most illegals from Central America pass and where the land narrows to just 100 miles from coast to coast, making apprehensions easier.[23] The United States has furnished inflatable Zodiac boats to patrol the rivers that flow through the area. However, the May 2002 massacre of 26 Indians in the Oaxacan highlands has drawn military and law-enforcement personnel from the isthmus, even as the completion of roads from Tuxtla Gutiérrez to the Gulf of Mexico and from Mexico to the Mayan ruins at Tikal, Guatemala, opens new arteries for illicit activities.

Fourth, in late 2000, Preciado announced a plan that could forgive more than 25,000 foreigners who had relied on bogus documents to live and work in Mexico. The commissioner made clear that the pardon should not be confused with amnesty. "What we want to do is offer foreigners living in Mexico a chance to legalize their immigrant status," he stressed.[24] Men and women from any country may take advantage of this initiative, provided they arrived in the country before January 1, 2000, are employed, carry out a legal activity that benefits the country, or are related to a Mexican citizen or legal resident.

Table 1. Mexico: Illegal Aliens Apprehended, 1995-2002

Country of Origin	1995	%	1996	%	1997	%	1998	%
Guatemala	52,988	50.03	53,621	48.53	39,017	44.86	49,360	41.55
Honduras	27,267	24.75	31,567	28.57	25,524	29.35	38,169	32.13
El Salvador	20,781	19.62	21,375	19.35	19,616	22.55	26,954	22.69
Nicaragua	2,484	2.35	1,975	1.79	1,203	.38	2,015	1.70
Costa Rica	69	.07	78	.07	54	.06	72	.06
Belize	114	.11	112	.10	106	.12	106	.09
Total Central America	**103,703**	**97.92**	**108,728**	**98.41**	**85,520**	**98.33**	**116,676**	**98.22**
Other Latin American Nations	556	.53	385	.35	494	.57	498	.42
United States	174	.16	317	.29	347	.40	352	.30
Other Nations	1,469	1.39	1,054	.95	617	.70	1,262	1.06
Grand Total	**105,902**	**100.00**	**110,484**	**100.00**	**86,973**	**100.00**	**118,788**	**100.00**

Country of Origin	1999	%	2000	%	2001	%	2002*	%
Guatemala	53,432	40.64	78,336	47.06	68,026	44.93	14,130	47.32
Honduras	47,007	35.75	44,632	26.81	40,275	26.60	9,488	31.77
El Salvador	26,998	20.53	36,388	21.86	35,165	23.23	4,163	13.94
Nicaragua	1,507	1.15	1,942	1.17	1,719	1.14	270	.90
Costa Rica	69	.05	81	.05	148	.09	31	.10
Belize	117	.09	136	.08	113	.07	32	.10
Total Central America	**129,130**	**98.21**	**161,515**	**97.03**	**145,439**	**96.06**	**28,114**	**94.14**
Other Latin American Nations	903	.69	3,297	1.98	3,581	2.37	765	2.56
United States	304	.28	332	.20	542	.36	165	.55
Other Nations	1,149	.87	1,313	.79	1,843	1.22	817	2.74
Grand Total	**131,486**	**100.00**	**166,457**	**100.00**	**151,405**	**100.01**	**29,861**	**99.99**

* January-March figures.
Source: Unidad de Comunicación Social, Instituto Nacional de Migración, Mexico City.

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Under this Immigrant Legalization Program, the applicant must make application at the INM office nearest his home by presenting his passport and a letter explaining his reasons for seeking regularization. On a second visit, he must provide detailed background information. At this time, he may verify that he has paid to the Treasury Ministry a fee of approximately $172 (1,563 pesos) for himself and $106 (963 pesos) for each dependent.[25]

Provided the paperwork is in order, INM will render a decision on his case within 90 days. Preciado has set an informal goal of reaching decisions within 31 days; the Tapachula office has imposed upon itself a 25-day deadline. Although individuals and families may hire lawyers to navigate the bureaucratic process, immigration officials prefer to work directly with applicants, who can usually supply required answers more accurately than attorneys. The program ended at the beginning of 2002, but INM officials continue to process applications.

Finally, in June 2001, Fox met with leaders from Central America, including Belize and Panama, to launch the Plan Puebla-Panamá (PPP). This venture contemplates creating a 1,000-mile development corridor that would integrate southeastern Mexico with Central America. Praised by proponents as a latter-day "Marshall Plan," the initiative would provide highway, airport, and port infrastructure required for development, as well as electricity, oil, gas, and telecommunications facilities essential for sustained growth.

Central American presidents, whose countries are beset by severe poverty, drought, unemployment, low coffee prices, and other socioeconomic woes, have cheered the PPP like fans at a World Cup soccer match. They have already championed 16 potential projects to modernize higher education, promote technological literacy, spur tourism, impel industrialization, uplift border areas, and generate jobs that would allow some of the five million Central Americans who stream into Mexico each year to find employment at home.[26]

The venture has attracted an important booster in Enrique Iglesias, president of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), who coordinates the PPP's financing and promotion.

"The Puebla-Panama Plan can be a catalytic force to turn into reality many projects long desired in the [Mesoamerican] region," he said.[27]

Evaluation of Proposed Reforms

Plan Sur, Repatriation, and Beta Groups. Although it is premature to judge the Plan Sur, the influx of Central Americans apparently declined in 2001 compared with 2000, as indicated by the number of apprehensions and the number of deportations presented in Tables 1 and 2. Of course, the 9/11 disaster, not improved border control, could have constituted the key factor in this reduction, and INM figures may include several encounters with the same migrant. "Central Americans were scared to cross over because of fear of terrorism, a

Table 2. Mexico: Illegal Aliens Deported, 1995-2002

Country of Origin	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002*
Guatemala	51,773	50,274	37,705	45,649	50,853	70,848	58,582	9,704
Honduras	27,185	30,980	24,846	35,206	44,772	40,892	35,304	5,836
El Salvador	19,375	20,787	18,758	25,588	26,156	33,960	30,450	3,039
Nicaragua	2,502	1,868	1,166	1,844	1,394	1,836	1,496	215
Costa Rica	71	65	59	66	37	70	111	23
Belize	130	111	99	109	102	70	70	23
Total Central Amer.	**101,036**	**104,085**	**82,633**	**108,528**	**123,314**	**147,676**	**126,013**	**18,863**
Other Latin American Nations	1,201	744	627	448	1,005	4,260	5,607	773
United States	358	328	359	296	290	179	327	70
Other Nations	1,359	537	593	549	868	857	1,190	233
Grand Total	**103,954**	**105,694**	**84,212**	**109,821**	**125,477**	**152,967**	**133,137**	**19,939**

* January-March figures.
Source: Unidad de Comunicación Social, Instituto Nacional de Migración, Mexico City.

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backlash against immigrants, and a lack of jobs because of the economic downturn in the United States," argued Father Rigoni.[28] Human-rights organizations reported an upswing in illegal entries in 2002, as evidenced by a 23 percent jump in the number of migrants lodged at the Center Belén in January and February compared with the first two months of 2001.[29]

To his credit, Commissioner Preciado has moved to combat widespread corruption in the INM. He has changed 94 percent of the state supervisors or delegates and dismissed more than 800 of the institute's approximately 3,800 employees. In addition, in early 2002, he publicized the creation of a special prosecutor for immigration affairs, who would work with the PGR and the PFP to ferret out wrongdoing in the agency. "It's time," he said, "to treat the trafficking of people as a serious crime and we are certain that ... we will achieve better coordination to banish corruption and impunity."[30]

During an unannounced visit to INM's Tapachula center in early March 2002, the author witnessed the orderly and businesslike dispatch of illegal aliens to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. There was no opportunity to observe what happened to the deportees once they left Mexican soil; however, of the 3,000 complaints of human-rights violations received by the Casa de Migrante in Tecún Umán, 95 percent came from Central Americans deported from Mexico.[31]

Immigrants and local residents in Tapachula speak well of the Beta Groups. Yet this organization faces grossly inadequate staffing. For example, the Tapachula office has only 17 agents. These men and women, who work two long shifts, must cover an area roughly the size of Delaware. And while Beta is not a law-enforcement body, nine of the officers in Tapachula are supplied by state and local police forces and only eight are Beta professionals.

It remains to be seen whether current Beta Group personnel will fall prey to the corruption, coercion, and hostility from law enforcement bodies encountered by their predecessors. In November 1999, José Angel Martínez Rodríguez, the Beta coordinator in Tabasco state, was selected to meet with Mary Robinson, the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights. During this session, he informed her of the dangers facing Beta agents when they tried to protect immigrants. He referred specifically to the Sayaxché cartel in Guatemala that boasts ties to prominent businessmen in Tenosique and Palenque whom the Beta chief named. Four days later, Martínez Rodríguez was shot to death by Anarcarsis Peralta Moo, a member of the Federal Preventive Police. The policeman claimed his gun discharged accidentally as he was cleaning it. Despite an attorney general's investigation, Peralta Moo remains a free man.[32]

Regularization. Mexico's regularization scheme, an attempt to accomplish at home what Fox is urging Washington policy makers to implement in the United States, has achieved meager results. In 2001, only 6,498 foreigners availed themselves of this process. Of these applications, 4,798 were approved, 219 denied, and 1,481 remain pending. Guatemalans (30.6 percent) headed the list of applicants, followed by Hondurans (20.4 percent), Salvadorans (13.9 percent), Americans (5.9 percent), Colombians (5 percent), Nicaraguans (3.8 percent), and Cubans (3.1 percent) — with people from various nations accounting for the other 17.3 percent of requests.[33]

What explains the small number of participants? To begin with, the program received scant publicity. The fees — while by no means exorbitant — also presented an obstacle in a country where the average daily wage is only several dollars. In addition, most illegal immigrants view Mexico as a thoroughfare to the United States and have no interest in having their status in Mexico regularized. Finally, the Mexican government pays little attention to the status of foreigners living in their country, provided — of course — they do not run afoul of the law.

Plan Puebla-Panamá. It remains to be seen whether the Puebla-Panamá Plan is a regional bonanza or a boondoggle. The IDB may provide loans and credits, but Mexico's private sector has been slow to match with investments its glowing praise of the program. Instead, owners of money-losing construction companies have beseeched the government to barrel ahead with megaprojects, which they hope will generate contracts for their hard-pressed firms. Despite their eagerness for public outlays in the corridor, few Mexican entrepreneurs regard the region's 65 million people — more than half of them dirt poor — as an attractive market for sophisticated goods and services.

Subcomandante Marcos, leader of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), has excoriated the PPP as a ploy by "international capitalists and their lackey Fox to eradicate the indigenous culture, exploit the region's resources and keep the local population in servitude."[34] Although the Zapatistas largely engage in guerrilla theater and propaganda appeals to the domestic left, the media, and foreign NGOs, they are capable of sabotaging the road, communications, and energy projects that would have to pass through rain

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forests and rugged flood-prone terrain. In addition, Central America's Catholic bishops have blasted the "neoliberal" plan for focusing on energy and infrastructure to the exclusion of human development and the alleviation of poverty.

"Globalization in Latin America ... has widened the gap between the rich and poor," stated Gregorio Rosa Chávez, auxiliary bishop of San Salvador, who has also decried the pernicious impact of corruption and impunity in the region.[35]

Such criticism aside, the program's coordinator asserted that "a purse of $4 billion" was available to execute PPP projects. This extremely optimistic statement came on the eve of an "Investment Expo" held on June 27-28, 2002, in Mérida, Yucatán. The purpose of this gathering, which coincided with a summit of chief executives from PPP countries, was to drum up private investment for the Puebla-Panamá venture.[36]

Guatemalan Guestworkers. Continual lobbying by Guatemalan authorities, especially by Rómulo Alfredo Caballeros, adroit ambassador in Mexico City, sparked a bilateral meeting about *jornaleros*, under the auspices of the Mexico-Guatemala Binational Group on Migratory Affaris. In Tapachula on February 12, 2002, after three hours of discussions, federal and state officials established an ad hoc group on Guatemalan temporary migrant workers, which would meet two to four times per year.[37] The participants also formed a Subgroup on Agricultural Labor.

Roberto Rodríguez Hernández, an official of Mexico's Foreign Relations Ministry, pledged to make certain that *finca* owners respected the workers' human and labor rights. He also announced that "with new technology and modern equipment, Guatemalan agricultural workers will enter Mexico with a smart card with [computer] chips to permit better control of the location and length of stay of workers." This device, he added, "will demonstrate that the Mexican government is concerned about establishing an orderly, regular flow of migrants [who enjoy] their labor rights as *jornaleros*." Herbert W. Bech-Cabrera, Guatemala's head of consular affairs, expressed his hope that the ad hoc group would lead to a "more humane" treatment of Guatemalan workers[38] — a promise previously articulated in a mid-1997 meeting of Central American migration commissioners in Mexico City.[39]

Five months after the most recent parleys, the Mexican government had neither moved to convene the group nor proposed specific reforms. Mexican officials privately told the author that they were preparing an Action Plan, which contemplated a study of Mexican-Guatemalan migration questions. They said their government stood ready to investigate human-rights violations if the Guatemalans would only substantiate their charges with hard evidence. In their February 2002 meeting, Fox and Guatemalan chief executive Alfonso Portillo Cabrera emphasized the need "to preserve and ensure migrants' rights, their human dignity and social and economic well-being whatever their legal status." They agreed to form within 90 days a high-level group that would concentrate on border security. In view of the recent accusation of $378 million in fraud by Portillo Cabrera, his vice president, and confidants, the Guatemalan president must find it awkward to inveigh against corruption in Mexico.[40]

Key Differences in Political Environments. At first blush, it is tempting to analogize conditions at Mexico's southern flank with those at its frontier with the United States. After all, the escalating criminal activity that flourishes at both borders presents acute headaches to national, state, and local officials, as well as to the specific agencies responsible for enforcing the law. In addition, poverty and pollution beset cities, towns, and villages along both difficult-to-control borders.

Nonetheless, major factors distinguish the situation at the two borders. These are:

- No American counterparts exist for the Chiapan finca owners who blatantly exploit the guestworkers imported legally from Guatemala. Employers in the U.S. Southwest and elsewhere who hire illegal aliens may work them long hours for modest pay, while providing poor housing and few if any additional benefits. Nevertheless, there are dozens of effective, media-savvy immigrant-protection organizations that are on the lookout for such conditions. When abuses are exposed, the culpable rancher, food processor, restaurant owner, or contractor is likely to face criminal and, perhaps, civil charges. Even though wrongdoing toward immigrants exists in the United States, there is no situation comparable to the impunity enjoyed by the Chiapan growers who benefit from a program sanctioned by the Mexican government.

- The Mexican government has made the immigration issue its top priority with the Bush administration. In pressing their agenda, Fox, Castañeda, and Hernández enjoy support from large business, labor, religious, human-rights, and migrant organizations. Although the treatment of their immigrants is important to Central American nations,

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they do not have the resources with which to protect their nationals. The proposed establishment of joint consulates could enable them to employ more efficiently the money available for migration issues. These countries also lack in Mexico the plethora of effective advocates that Fox *et al.* can count on in the United States.[41] Not even the Guatemalan community in Mexico, which numbers 500,000 or more people, has a coherent organization, much less a lobbying capability. It appears that officials in El Salvador, a New Jersey-sized country bursting at the seams with people, turn a blind eye as some 36,000 of its citizens seek opportunities outside their poverty-stricken nation each year. Not only does their exodus diminish demands on social services at home, remittances from abroad enriched El Salvador's sputtering economy by $1.91 billion last year — with an additional $447.4 million pouring in during the first quarter of 2002.

- Along Mexico's northern frontier, the NAFTA members — led by the United States and Canada — have created the North American Development Bank (NADB) and the Border Environmental Cooperation Commission (BECC) to improve water and sewer systems in border cities. Problems plague both of these bodies. Nevertheless, the NADB and BECC are functioning agencies with concrete goals and specific achievements. In contrast, the Plan Puebla-Panamá appears to be a leap of faith. Even if the proposal becomes a reality, it will have little impact on Southern Chiapas, where lawlessness, poverty, and human rights violations flourish. If completed, a 1,000-mile long corridor could facilitate the northward smuggling of goods and people as well as development.

- The presence of the Electoral College further differentiates the United States from Mexico. Hispanic Americans command ever more attention from American political parties not only because they now constitute the nation's largest minority, but because they are disproportionately concentrated in California, Texas, Florida, New York, New Jersey, and Illinois. These states cast two-thirds of the 270 electoral votes required to capture the White House. Scattered minorities from Central American countries wield no such influence in Mexico, where the candidate who wins the most votes nationally becomes chief executive.

- The Mexican and international media are far more attentive to activities along Mexico's northern border than its southern border. Contributing to the disproportional coverage is the presence in the north of more than a score of large cities with daily newspapers and television and radio stations. Fox's pre-Christmas visits to the north — to welcome home Mexican immigrants as "heroes" — also garner attention.

- Officially tolerated corruption abounds on both sides of the Mexican-Guatemalan frontier. While American officials are not saints, U.S. immigration, customs, and law-enforcement agents who flout the rule of law are likely to be charged with criminal activities and tried in a court that administers justice even-handedly. Mexico's efforts to promote professionalization among its own officials are commendable, but thus far have achieved limited success.

Table 3. Mexico's "Regularization" Program of 2001

Nationality	Number of Applicants
Guatemala	1,990
Honduras	1,326
El Salvador	904
U.S.A.	389
Colombia	325
Nicaragua	251
Cuba	205
Peru	196
Spain	127
Argentina	91
Belize	64
Others	630
Total	**6,498**

Source: Unidad de Communicatión Social, Institute Nacional de Migración, Mexico City

Conclusion

Although Fox and Preciado deserve praise for attempting to implement changes, a medley of factors — personnel shortages, low salaries, insufficient training of agents, lack of cooperation from sister agencies, and deeply-ingrained corruption on both sides of the Mexican-Guatemalan border — confront them with the challenge of treating a cancer with a band-aid.

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Fox railed against a March 2002 U.S. Supreme Court decision denying back pay to illegal workers. He could be even more persuasive with U.S. policymakers if he committed himself to cracking down on the blatant administrative disarray and official abuses that prevail at Mexico's southern border. He might even name a "czar" to coordinate efforts in the South.[42] He could also make root-and-branch changes in the Guatemalan-Mexican *bracero* program before promoting a guestworker scheme with the United States. Mexico's long-forgotten southern border is beginning to appear on the radar screens of articulate observers. After visiting this frontier, Gabriela Rodríguez, the UN Human Rights Commissioner's special rapporteur on migrants' rights said: "Mexico is one of the countries where illegal immigrants are highly vulnerable to human rights violations and become victims of degrading sexual exploitation and slavery-like practices, and are denied access to education and healthcare."[43]

In a similar vein, Rafael Fernández de Castro, one of Mexico's most distinguished academics and editor of the Spanish-language version of *Foreign Affairs*, has criticized Foreign Secretary Castañeda for "forgetting about Central America" even as he pursues a "honeymoon with the United States." Mexico, the scholar charged, has implemented a policy toward illegal migrants from Central America that is "more racist and discriminatory than that of the United States on [Mexico's] northern border."[44]

The comment of Father Rigoni seems as true today as it was when he made it in 1998, "For those people who pass through Chiapas, the route is not the way of the cross, but a hellish crucifixion."[45]

End Notes

[1] Hernández, who enjoys both Mexican and U.S. citizenship, heads the new Presidential Office for Mexicans Living Abroad.

[2] The Mexicans employ the term "regularization" (regularización) to mean a step towards granting amnesty.

[3] Henry, John C. "Fox to Pitch Unity Proposal to U.S.," *Houston Chronicle*, August 24, 2000, Internet ed.

[4] Ruffo's official title is Commissioner for Northern Frontier Affairs.

[5] Thompson, Ginger. "U.S. and Mexico to Open Talks on Freer Migration for Workers," *New York Times*, February 16, 2001, Internet ed.

[6] Lloyd, Marion. "Mexican Official Pushes Image of Migration," *Boston Globe*, June 12, 2001, p.A8.

[7] Callejo, Antonio *et al*. "Soldados vestidos de gris: la frontera sur militarizado," *Proceso*, August 20, 2001.

[8] Guzmán, Armando. "A Martínez Rodríguez, del grupo beta, 'lo mató la mafia,'" *Proceso*, December 20, 1999.

[9] Jaramillo, Velia. "Frontera México-Guatemala: comercio de humanos, de droga, de autos, de armas," *Proceso*, December 20, 1999; and "Immigration Officials to be Replaced by Military along Southern Border," *The News* (Mexico City), October 2, 2001.

[10] "Seguridad y recesión tras atentados redujeron flujo ilegales," EFE News Service, December 29, 2001.

[11] Formed in 1969 in a Los Angeles suburb, the gang named itself "Mara" for the Virgin Mary and "Salvatruchas" to demonstrate its Salvadoran roots; see José Gil Olmos, "Los mara de los salvatruchas, cazadores de migrantes de California," *La Jornada*, April 13, 1998, Internet ed.

[12] "Migrantes centroamericanos pagan con la vida en búsqueda del 'sueño americano,'" *Agence France Presse*, December 18, 2001, Internet ed.

[13] I tried unsuccessfully to obtain the perspective of Mexico's Labor Ministry about this program. The ministry's director of information, Lic. Javier Carreto Mares, with whom I spoke by phone while in Mexico City in June 2002, failed either to arrange an appointment with the appropriate official or to comment on the penultimate draft of this *Backgrounder* which was sent to him.

[14] Four nuns operate the Casa de la Mujer, which serves as a shelter and job-training center for some of the approximately 800 prostitutes in the Tecún Umán area. Many of these women and girls left impoverished families in El Salvador and Honduras when traffickers promised them good wages as maids or waitresses in Mexico or the U.S.

[15] The exchange rate of 9.1 pesos to the dollar, which prevailed in March 2002, is employed throughout this paper.

[16] "Al descubierto red de explotadores de humanos," *El Orbe* (Tapachula), October 7, 2001; for examples of similar articles, see "Jornaleros piden pago de solarios," *Prensa Libre* (Guatemala City), October 8, 2001, p. 44; and "Protestan 300 braceros guatemaltecos por falta de page," *Diario del Sur* (Tapachula), October 2, 2001, p. 2.

[17] Smith, James. "Mexico Curbs Neighbors' Migrant Flow," *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 2001.

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[18] Schwartz, Janet L. "New Border Plan to Cut Repeat Crossings," *The News*, August 2, 2001, Internet ed.

[19] Cruz López, Alfonso. "Migración gasta $90 milliones al año por deportar indocumentados," *Crónica*, February 9, 2002, Internet ed.

[20] Smith.

[21] INM returns the mushrooming number of Ecuadoreans by chartered boats to cut travel expenses; see, Jo Tuckman, "Mexican Detention Center Holds Would-be Migrants from 39 Countries," The Associated Press, August 16, 2001, Internet ed.

[22] Tuckerman.

[23] Thompson, Ginger. "Mexico's Open Southern Border Lures Migrants Headed to U.S.," *New York Times*, August 5, 2001, Internet ed.

[24] Quoted in *The News*, September 7, 2001, Internet ed.

[25] Although an extra bureaucratic step, payment of the fee to the Finance Ministry diminishes the opportunity for sticky-fingered immigration agents to demand bribes.

[26] Quoted in "BID respalda plan puebla panamá para integración y desarrollo," EFE News Service, June 29, 2001, Internet ed.

[27] Quoted in "El plan require una inversión de seis mil millones de dolares hasta el año 2006," *Expansión* (Madrid), July 16, 2001, Internet ed.

[28] Tayler, Letta. "River Crossings Rising," *Newsday*, March 21, 2001, Internet ed.

[29] Tayler.

[30] Ramírez, "Un reto erradicar la corrupción en migración, *Novedades*, December 14, 2001, Internet ed.

[31] "Canciller salvadorena dice traficantes son 'enemigos' immigrantes," EFE News Service, February 20, 2002.

[32] Guzmán, Armando and Ricardo Ravelo, "Frontera sur: tráfico de drogas y personas," *Proceso*, December 13, 1999.

[33] Information supplied to the author by the Unidad de Comunicación Social, Instituto Nacional de Migración, March 8, 2002, Mexico City.

[34] Irizar, Guadalupe. "El istmo no se vende - 'Marcos,'" *Reforma*, February 26, 2001, Internet ed.

[35] "Critica iglesia católica el PPP," *El Universal*, August 18, 2001, Internet ed.

[36] "Anuncian reunion empresarial para obras del PPP," *El Economista*, May 27, 2002, Internet ed.

[37] The agencies represented on this ad hoc group are, for Mexico: SRE, INM, and ST&PS; and for Guatemala, the ministries of Foreign Relations, Labor, and Government, as well as the Dirección General de Migración. The government of Chiapas will also participate in the subgroup.

[38] "Acuerdo binacional para proteger a jornaleros," *El Orbe*, February 13, 2002.

[39] "Mexico coordinara con CA protección a migrantes," *El Nacional*, August 11, 1997, Internet ed.

[40] Salazar Monzón, Eric. "Guatemala's Anticorruption Movement Strengthens Call for New Government," *Financial Times Information*, March 17, 2002, Internet ed.

[41] Among human rights groups active in Mexico are the Coalición Pro Defensa de Migrantes de Baja California, Juvenile del Desierto, Casa del Migrantes de los Scalabrinianos, Casa Madre Ajunta, Casa YMCA Educación Civica (Mexicali), Procuraduría de los Derechos Humanos de Baja California, Centro de Apoyo a Migrantes de Tijuana, Centro de Estudios Fronterizos y de Promoción de los Derechos Humanos de Reynosa, Colegio de la Frontera Sur (Tapachula), Centro de Derechos Humanos Tepeyac (Oaxaca), Oficina de Derechos Humanos de la Casa de Migrantes de Tecún Umán, Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, El Colegio de Michoacán, Procuraduría de los Derechos Humanos de Guanajuato, Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Augustín Pro, Mexico-U.S. Advocates Network, Heartland Alliance for Human Needs and Human Rights, and Sin Fronteras.

[42] Although some Mexican officials regard PPP chief Florencio Salazar Adame as de facto Southern border czar, his overwhelming focus is on the projected development zone.

[43] "UN Condemns Human Rights Violations of Immigrants," EFE News Service, March 2, 2002, Internet ed.

[44] Mandola, Diana Anabel. "Adviertan sobre fracaso del plan puebla-panamá," *El Universal*, March 3, 2002, p. 9.

[45] Ortiz Pinchett, Francisco. "Asaltos, heridos, extorsionados o vejados, son deportados del país unos 300 cada día," *Proceso*, September 14, 1998.

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Backgrounder

Mexico's Forgotten Southern Border

Does Mexico practice at home what it preaches abroad?

By George W. Grayson

Mexican chief executive Vicente Fox, Foreign Secretary Jorge Castañeda, and presidential official Juan Hernández have relentlessly implored Washington to afford better treatment and more opportunities to their countrymen. They have continually championed the issuance of additional visas for Mexicans to enter the United States, the institution of a guestworker program that would allow 250,000 or more Mexicans to gain employment north of the Rio Grande, and the provision of amnesty to the 4 million-plus Mexicans who reside illegally in America. Indeed, several months before his December 2000 inauguration, Fox even argued for the eventual elimination of all restrictions on the movement of labor throughout North America.

Mexico emphasizes human rights in making its case. But is its advocacy of human rights real or rhetorical? Does the Fox government practice at home what it preaches abroad? One way to shed light on these questions is to explore Mexican policy with respect to Central Americans and other foreigners who unlawfully enter the country by crossing its zigzagged, mountainous, and jungle infested 750-mile southern border with Guatemala and Belize.

This *Backgrounder* focuses on the National Migration Institute (INM), a dependency of the Ministry of Governance (also called Ministry of the Interior), and will

- identify abuses suffered by these illegal aliens;
- describe the reforms advanced by the current administration to address these ills;
- evaluate the relative success or failure of these changes; and
- present the key differences between the political environments at the Mexico-Guatemala-Belize and U.S.-Mexico frontiers.

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